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Summary

The word “ability” has two meanings. One refers to established competence such as the ability to run or do arithmetic and the other involves a prediction that somebody will be able to do something. We commonly use “ability” in both these ways but in the educational/ psychological context, ability is taken to mean an indication of the propensity to be able to do something, an underlying trait which shows that someone, given the right opportunities, will demonstrate competence in an area. Some would call this intelligence but its measurement to produce an intelligence quotient (IQ), have acquired negative connotations.

Ability testing has been in use for over 100 years and it has been used so widely and investigated so thoroughly that more is probably known about the subject than any other area in education. Throughout that time, ability tests have been used to try to spot talent and to help to remove bias from judgment. Other uses and perspectives have changed dramatically. The simplistic links made to race are now no longer tenable and concerns about bias within the tests themselves are much more clearly understood. Indeed, the knowledge base generated through research into abilities can now be used to counter racist perceptions. Further, our understanding of how intelligence develops is much stronger than it ever was as is our knowledge about the architecture of the mind and how we think. For these reasons the term “developed ability” rather than simply “ability” is to be preferred.

There can be little doubt that ability testing has been used in harmful ways – condemning individuals and groups wrongly. But there can also be little doubt that if used appropriately, ability testing can be used in a positive way to help education and the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University have championed its use in schools for the last 25 years.